

HABS  
PA  
7-CLAYB,  
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TOWN OF CLAYSBURG  
Refractories Company Town  
Claysburg  
Blair County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5970

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

## TOWN OF CLAYSBURG Refractories Company Town

HABS No. PA-5970

Location: Near U.S. Highway 220, Blair County, South Central Pennsylvania

Founded: 1839

Brickyard  
built: 1913, closed 1987

Company houses  
built: 1917-26

Significance: The village of Claysburg more than doubled in size when the Standard Refractories Company built a refractory brickyard on its northern edge in 1913. The company built a total of 105 houses for its workers, but many found lodging in houses built by local investors. Claysburg is an example of a company town in which local residents contributed to the town's building boom by building a substantial number of rental houses for the influx of workers. The Claysburg brick plant was taken over by General Refractories Company in 1922. Life and employment in Claysburg continued to center around the brickyard until it closed in 1987.

### Project Information:

The results of the study of refractory brickyards and towns was published in 1993: Kim E. Wallace, Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service). The contents of this publication were transmitted to the Library of Congress in report form. See additional information on the refractories industry under HABS No. PA-5973, Refractories Company Towns, Mt. Union, Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania. Research notes, field photos and copies of historic photos collected during the project were transmitted to the AIHP Collection, Special Collections, Stapleton Library, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705.

## History

Like those in southern Huntingdon County, the ridges of southern Blair County were often covered with ganister. There was enough to support the growth of two brickyard towns just over a mile apart in Greenfield Township. Their brickyards were both built in the 1910s, and after 1922, both were owned by General Refractories Company. Despite their proximity, the plants were always maintained as separate facilities. Sproul and Claysburg, the two towns associated with the plants, developed differently and had very different histories.

In 1910 William A. Stanton, formerly employed by Harbison-Walker, persuaded seven other men to join him in purchasing the Sandy Ridge Fire Brick Company in Centre County and financing construction of a silica brick plant at Sarah Furnace, renamed Sproul, in southern Blair County. The next year the partnership bought two more existing plants and incorporated as the General Refractories Company.<sup>1</sup> Its Blair County property was sited at the foot of ganister-covered Dunnings Mountain to compete with the Mount Union plants making silica bricks for the steel industry.

The local supply of ganister was so good that in 1913 a group of local investors built a second plant at Claysburg about a mile and a half north of the first. They formed the Standard Refractories Company led by Thomas N. Kurtz, a Johnstown native who had been in the refractories business since beginning work as a teenager in the office at A. J. Haws' Refractories. Kurtz worked for two of the refractories companies in Mt. Union before moving to Hollidaysburg to be closer to his own works at Claysburg. He oversaw its growth to twenty kilns with a 140,000-brick capacity then sold it to General Refractories in 1922.<sup>2</sup>

Claysburg's twenty-one original lots, along Main or Bedford Street just east of Beaver Dam Creek, were plotted in 1839. The little village was anchored by a saw and grist mill and a stone inn where namesake Henry Clay was reputed to have been a guest. By 1883 it claimed two hundred inhabitants who supported three church congregations, an Odd Fellows Hall, a pharmacist, undertaker, and several merchants. It was about this time that

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<sup>1</sup>"The General Refractories Company," Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society (November 15, 1943), 363.

<sup>2</sup>Kurtz helped found the Mt. Union Silica Brick Company in 1901 and was then hired by Mt. Union Refractories after it started production in 1912. He continued his career in refractories after selling the Claysburg plant in 1922, gaining control of U. S. Refractories in Mt. Union. He oversaw its sale to North American Refractories in 1930 and remained with that company as vice president until his death in 1938. "Late T. N. Kurtz Claysburg Brick Industry Founder," Altoona Mirror (August 18, 1954). "Claysburg Brick Companies Merge," Altoona Mirror (August 5, 1922). "Big Brick Plant Deal Is Closed," Altoona Mirror (August 23, 1922).

Jesse L. Hartman, manager of an iron furnace at McKee five miles north of Claysburg, began quarrying ganister from Dunnings Mountain.<sup>3</sup> Three decades later when Thomas Kurtz and his investors decided to locate a refractories plant at the source, private and company development more than doubled Claysburg's geographic area, extending its border on either side of the state road north of the original village.

Local merchants and landholders profited from the expansion and influx of new residents. Several local families recorded plots of land as additions to the town's territory and subdivided them into house lots. "Barnhart's Extension to Claysburg," proffered by the heirs of Adam Barnhart, was recorded in 1917. Descendents of Jacob Fries sold land to Standard Refractories which was included in the "Second Extension to Claysburg" recorded in the Blair County Courthouse in 1920. Martin A. Lingenfelter owned a plot on the north side of the township road between Ann and Railroad streets which became the "Fairview Addition" to Claysburg, surveyed in October 1913.<sup>4</sup>

Another Claysburg native, Abram, or Abraham, Burket was one of the most prominent local businessmen who became interested in residential development around the plant. He was already prospering in 1912 and was in a position to take advantage of the imminent boom. Burket had returned to Claysburg from the Civil War in 1865 and was listed in township tax records that year as a laborer and owner of one cow. Ten years later he was a homeowner and merchant. In 1885 a second house, a horse, buggy, and twenty acres of timberland were added to his holdings. By the time Standard Refractories began building brick kilns, he owned eleven houses, lime kilns, and more than a hundred acres of timber and farm land. He owned property on the west side of the plant and turned his attention to developing it with rental and speculation housing.

A series of photographs of the area show the Burket family's planing mill and the gradual infill of houses. Between 1917 and 1920 when war demand brought a boom to the refractories industry, nineteen houses were added to Burket's tax roll bringing his

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<sup>3</sup>Africa, 117. "Hon. J. L. Hartman Pneumonia Victim," Altoona Mirror (February 17, 1950). "Ganister Bricks Steelmen's Need," Altoona Mirror (June 13, 1934).

<sup>4</sup>Rev. Isaac Krider, Barnhart's Extension to Claysburg. Recorded August 14, 1917, Blair County Courthouse. J. Luden Henry, Plan of lots laid out for the Standard Refractories Company on the tract of land purchased from the Heirs of Jacob Fries, deceased. October 1916. General Refractories Company file. N. G. Young, Map of Second Extension to Claysburg, Greenfield Township, Blair County, Penna. Standard Refractories Company, July 1917. Recorded May 28, 1920, Blair County Courthouse. General Refractories Company file. J. Luden Henry, Map of Fairview Addition to Claysburg, Greenfield Twp., Blair Co., Pa. Property of M. A. Lingenfelter. October 30-31, 1913. Recorded November 5, 1913, Blair County Courthouse. General Refractories Company file.

total to twenty-nine. They included one-and-a-half-story bungalows fronting on the Hollidaysburg and Bedford Branch Railroad and two-story, gambrel-roofed houses on Catherine and Vine streets. Abram Burket's extension to Claysburg, from Beaver Dam Run to the township road, was mapped in 1917.<sup>5</sup>

Even though local property holders like Burkett built houses for workers, Standard Refractories built its own housing stock. Its "Second Extension to Claysburg" was officially recorded in June 1920. Seventeen company houses first appear in tax records in 1917. They included eight of one story assessed at \$175 each, two of two stories for \$550, and seven of one-and-a-half and two stories for \$400. The lack of uniformity is contrary to the pattern usually expected of the company town but was typical of Standard Refractories', and later General Refractories', building program in Claysburg. Contracting with the local building team of Essington and Burdine Claar, who founded their business in 1912, the company brought its housing stock to a total of 105 buildings by 1926. The tax assessor put them in fourteen valuation groups ranging from one two-story brick house and two one-and-a-half-story houses to the largest groups of eighteen two-story houses and twenty-four one-story bungalows.<sup>6</sup> These houses were built to accommodate workers recruited from among Eastern European immigrants and from the African-American community around Little Rock, Arkansas.<sup>7</sup>

The Greenfield Township tax assessment records first included a list of twelve "foreigners" in 1912. By 1919, 101 men were listed separately as "Aliens employed by Standard Refractories Co." and forty-five as "colored" employees. The 1925 tax assessment census showed the proportion reversed with 112 "colored" residents with forty-two spouses and forty-one "aliens" with twenty spouses. The assessor noted of both groups that "all reside in Claysburg."

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<sup>5</sup>Greenfield Township tax assessment records. Jean Markley, interview by author, Claysburg, Pa., June 15, 1991. J. Luden Henry, A Connected Draft showing the property and right of way belonging to the Standard Refractories Company at Claysburg, in Greenfield township, Blair County, Pennsylvania, and the piece to be acquired from Abram Burket. . . . November 15, 1915. General Refractories Company file. J. Luden Henry, Map of Lots Adjoining the Town of Claysburg in Greenfield Township, Blair Co., Pa. for Abram Burket or Burket's Extension to Claysburg, October 13, 1913. Recorded July 14, 1948, Blair County Courthouse. General Refractories Company file.

<sup>6</sup>The Altoona Mirror reported that Standard Refractories' tenant houses numbered 140 at the time of the sale to General Refractories in 1922, "Big Brick Plant Deal Is Closed," (August 23, 1922). Greenfield township tax assessment records. E. H. & B. Claar advertisement in Monahan, n.p. 175th, 32.

<sup>7</sup>Gray Fitzsimons, ed., Blair County and Cambria County, Pennsylvania: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER. National Park Service, 1990), 96.

For the next few decades Claysburg was distinctive in the valley as a diversely populated, booming little town whose Main Street was crowded every Saturday with moviegoers and shoppers. Locally known neighborhoods included "shanty row," one-story houses lined along the Juniata river branch and the railroad spur to the brickyard, and "Little Africa," near the brickyard dump between Route 220 and the Lutheran Church. Italian and Austrian families like the Gazzaras and Berrichs joined those with a longer local history like the Mauks and Zeths of German heritage. Joseph and Mary Gazzara traveled from Italy to Altoona in 1912, then moved to Claysburg when construction of the brickyard began. They built a house in Fairview Addition and opened a grocery store on Bedford Street. In 1926 they built a multi-purpose building used as a dance hall, pool room, and barber shop. Anthony Berrich immigrated in 1906 from Austria to join his brother working in the stone quarry at Carlim in eastern Blair County. He married Catherine Verbonitz and moved to Claysburg in 1915 with a number of Carlim residents who thought the brickyard offered better opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to supporting commercial growth, prosperity and the population boom gave a real boost to local religious institutions. By 1914 there were enough new residents of the Catholic faith to support a mission church. St. Anne's Catholic Church was dedicated in October. African-Americans in Claysburg organized the Mt. Hope Missionary Baptist congregation in 1914. Their church was completed in 1921 under the supervision of Rev. W. H. Roosezell.<sup>9</sup> Methodists of the area had been holding services in the Odd Fellows Hall in Claysburg since 1879 when it moved from the Union Church at Sarah Furnace. In 1915 they were able to build a Queen Anne-style brick church on the south side of the brickyard.

While Standard Refractories was entirely responsible for Claysburg's rapid growth during the 1910s and 1920s, the company relied on the existing infrastructure and private enterprise to expand to serve the increased population. Still, with more than one hundred company houses, the company was also committed to providing community services. Beyond the basic necessity of maintaining the houses, it supplied electricity to much of the town from a steam plant run with waste heat from the kilns.<sup>10</sup> It

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<sup>8</sup>Markley interview, June 15, 1991. 175th, 126-27, 176. Africa, 117-18.

<sup>9</sup>175th, 109, 116. Cornerstone, Mt. Hope Missionary Baptist Church, Claysburg, Pa. While Mt. Union, the other brickyard town where African-American workers were recruited, still has an African-American population with active churches, most of Claysburg's African-American residents moved away, and the church was sold to another Baptist congregation. Jean Markley, interview by author, Claysburg, Pa., June 28, 1991.

<sup>10</sup>Moore and Taylor, 51.

provided space for the Claysburg post office in a company office building and sponsored a kindergarten and playground for local children. A nurse was also stationed in the company office building; each employee was covered by an accident and life insurance policy. A baseball diamond and tennis courts were built on company property and a company supervisor was put in charge of "social work and recreation." A clubhouse for employees and business visitors was maintained in the Jacob and Eliza Fries house on Main Street. It was succeeded by the Greenfield Township Lodge about a mile north of town.<sup>11</sup>

Like their coworkers at Sproul, employees at Claysburg shifted away from their anti-union stance by the 1940s. In 1944 they were dissatisfied enough with company policies to support a local under the United Construction Workers' Union. Membership was soon transferred to District 50 of the United Mine Workers, then to the United Steel Workers in 1972.<sup>12</sup> Census takers recorded 714 employees at the Sproul and Claysburg brickyards in 1946. Ten years later the number had fallen to 633, and 350 of those workers were furloughed when a steel strike cut orders.<sup>13</sup> It was an early indication of a downhill trend.

In 1958 about 190 people were working at Claysburg, and only a maintenance crew of about twelve was employed at Sproul. But in April 1959 the rosters were back up to 458 at Claysburg and about 220 at Sproul. Much of the increase at Claysburg was at the expense of jobs in other localities. General Refractories consolidated all of its silica operations at Claysburg, closing other plants including one at Port Matilda, Clearfield County. The revival at Sproul did not last long. The plant was closed in December 1960 when orders for open-hearth bricks declined. It was scheduled to reopen in mid-1962 with twelve to twenty men after the closing of a plant at Orviston in Clearfield County. Machinery was moved from Orviston to Rockdale, Wisconsin and to Sproul and the brickyard there was retooled to manufacture refractory specialties rather than bricks. The conversion was successful, and nineteen of the yard's twenty-two beehive kilns were demolished in 1964.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>175th, 224. "Claysburg Brick Companies Merge," Altoona Mirror (August 5, 1922). Markley interviews.

<sup>12</sup>175th, 99.

<sup>13</sup>Pennsylvania Industrial Directories, 1946, 1956. "Steel Strike Idles 350 In County Refractories," Altoona Mirror (July 9, 1956).

<sup>14</sup>"Claysburg Area Brick Plants Hard At Work," Altoona Mirror (April 22, 1959). "Sproul Operation To Begin In May," Altoona Mirror (March 14, 1962). "Sproul Brick Kilns Set For Dismantling," Altoona Mirror (July 24, 1964).

While the Sproul plant continues operation in 1992, Claysburg faltered along with the steel industry. In the late 1970s company spokesmen characterized silica brick making as "a cyclical business," but were optimistic that "some of the peaks and valleys have been evened out to assure a more stable work force and to help keep a smoother running economy in Claysburg."<sup>15</sup> The recession of the early 1980s, however, disrupted any sense of equilibrium. In May 1982 the plant was shut down for lack of orders, and in June it was supporting only twenty shipping and maintenance workers. Forty more were to be called back but only for a few weeks. In 1983 the union local voted "overwhelmingly" to accept concessions, including a ten percent pay cut, elimination of a holiday, and a one-year freeze on supplemental unemployment benefits, in hopes of securing more orders for the coke-oven bricks that were the plant's specialty.<sup>16</sup>

During this time, officials at General Refractories reemphasized their industry's dependence on "Big Steel." At Sproul, employees were kept busy because the mortars and mixes they made were used for general maintenance in steel production, but Claysburg's product was used in new construction and the manager was skeptical about the chance for recovery at his plant:

We certainly hope we have a future. If we felt we didn't, we would have shut down a long time ago...but I don't know how much longer we'll be able to withstand this inactivity.

Company vice president Richard Allison, a native of Claysburg, echoed the manager's caution and alluded to the effect a closing would have on the community:

We don't know what the future holds for any of our plants. We are continually evaluating...We have a major investment at Claysburg, and we don't want to walk away from that. And then there are the people; we don't want to walk away from them.<sup>17</sup>

Harbison-Walker at Mt. Union and General Refractories at Claysburg were the last two makers of silica bricks for coke ovens and there was some speculation as to which would close first and give the other the opportunity to survive on the entire

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<sup>15</sup>175th, 18. "What's That Company Make?" Altoona Mirror (August 23, 1978).

<sup>16</sup>"Claysburg Plant Shutting Down," Altoona Mirror (May 26, 1982). "General Refractories Sets Callback," Altoona Mirror (June 8, 1982). "Brick Workers Agree To Pay Cut," Altoona Mirror (February 10, 1983).

<sup>17</sup>Tom Gibb, "Grefco Awaits Comeback At Claysburg Brickyard," Altoona Mirror (November 29, 1983).



silica market. General Refractories made the first move, shifting its silica operations from Claysburg to a plant in Utah at the end of 1984. The Claysburg plant was kept open for small-scale production of specialty bricks. When Mt. Union's plant was closed about a year later, a General Refractories official commented that it was unlikely to have any effect at Claysburg. In 1986 many of the 280 men who were laid off in 1982 were still without work and Allison was very straightforward about the bleakness of the situation. "Unfortunately," he said, "the people of Claysburg keep clinging to the hope that there'll be a revival and they'll be called back to work. I don't see that happening." He told reporters that silica brick would never be in demand again and if the company was able to continue operations at Claysburg it would concentrate on the market for "high tech" bricks "used in newer types of mills."<sup>18</sup>

Fifteen people were still employed making specialty bricks at Claysburg in June 1987. Their pride at working against the odds to develop a new, high quality product in order to save the plant was very evident. Willard Knisely, president of the union local who started work at the brickyard a week after graduating from Claysburg-Kimmel High School in 1968, spoke for his peers:

We worked so hard--we knew if we got our product in the market we'd be able to come back. We have more work now than we've had in four years...our brick is the best product on the market."

Orders were increasing and they were hoping twenty to twenty-five more employees would be called back to work.<sup>19</sup>

Despite their efforts and apparent success, however, General Refractories announced that Claysburg would permanently shut down on July 31, 1987. The explanation given for the closing was the rising expense of workmen's compensation insurance. Although only fifteen employees were working, insurance also had to include fifty others on the call-back list who could make disability claims up to six years after their work ended. Premiums were high for the Claysburg plant because workers who spent so much time working in an environment filled with silica dust from crushed ganister and dried bricks were very prone to silicosis or "white lung," a disease in which healthy lung tissue was replaced with fibrous or scarred tissue. An investigator for

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<sup>18</sup>Tom Gibb, "Grefco: Future Holds Questions," Altoona Mirror (May 26, 1984). Tom Gibb, "Former Keystone of Mt. Union Business Faces Final Shutdown," Altoona Mirror (November 26, 1985). Kathy Mellott and Tom Gibb, "Hanging On: Brickyard Workers Keep Hoping Despite Forecast," Altoona Mirror (April 12, 1986).

<sup>19</sup>"Plant Closing Rocks Claysburg," Altoona Mirror (June 7, 1987).

the U. S. Public Health Service in 1917 described the effects of the disease: "if we can imagine a man with his chest bound with transparent adhesive plaster, we can form a mental picture of how useless were the efforts at deep inhalation made by these patients." According to one estimate, nine out of ten employees at Claysburg were eligible for silicosis disability when they retired, and nearly everyone in the brickyard towns knew of someone who died of complications from the disease before retirement age.<sup>20</sup>

Workers were still bitter about the circumstances of the closing when an Altoona Mirror reporter interviewed them a year after their final day at the plant. Willard Knisely was unemployed and believed that:

What the company wanted rid of was us, that's the main reason they shut down. They wanted new employees with clean lungs...At other plants they offered transfers if they were hiring someplace else. We asked them for transfers to other plants. They wouldn't even give use the option to do that because we worked in the silica dust.<sup>21</sup>

Only a few of the brickyarders found comparable jobs. Many took part-time and minimum wage positions, and others, like Knisely, were still looking. Darl Burkett commented on how difficult it was for long-time employees to find other work:

There were so many that was half-dead from the dust, and who's going to hire a man half-dead from dust? The company let a lot of old men down. These people worked there all their life.

The men were also worried about the closing's larger effect on their community. The brickyard had been the area's "economic backbone"; its loss would cause a chain reaction affecting people in other jobs, local government and small businesses.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Kathy Mellott, "General Refractories Closing At Claysburg," Altoona Mirror (June 6, 1987). Kathy Mellott, "End of Era: Claysburg's Brick Plant Closes Its Doors," Altoona Mirror (July 31, 1987). Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, "'The Street of Walking Death': Silicosis, Health, and Labor in the Tri-State Region, 1900-1950," The Journal of American History 77 (September 1990), 544, 531. Silicosis was most common in the silica brickyard towns--Mt. Union, Sproul, and Claysburg--but was also a hazard of the fire-clay brickyards. Lula Ripple, in Salina, attributed her father's death at age 57 to silicosis. Ripple interview. Phillips interview.

<sup>21</sup>Molly Gilmore, "Ex-union Chief: Employees Treated Badly," Altoona Mirror (July 31, 1988).

<sup>22</sup>Molly Gilmore, "A Year Later . . . Workers, Community Still Feel Pain of Refractories Closing," Altoona Mirror (July 31, 1988).

Residents of other towns could more easily accept their plants' closings as an uncontrollable result of changes in technology and industry, but Claysburg workers believed they had been given a chance to adapt to the new conditions. They made sacrifices in the form of concessions and a drastic cut in the workforce, and they worked hard to perfect the slag gates and high-carbon bricks that seemed to be in some demand in the steel industry. The closing was a betrayal of their hope and struggle. Willard Knisely missed working with men he had seen every day for nineteen years, and he believed that "General Refractories let this whole community down and left them with a bunch of scrap."<sup>23</sup>

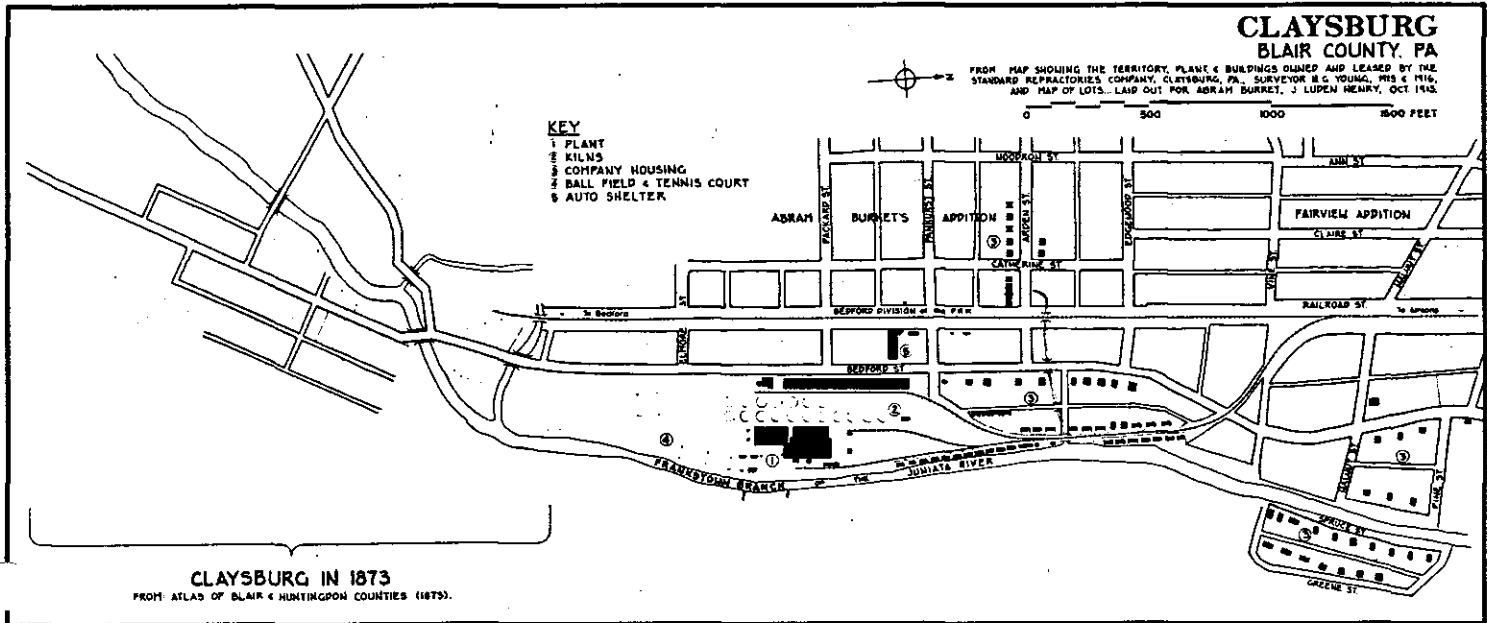
A local trucking company leased the brickyard after General Refractories moved out its equipment.<sup>24</sup> In 1991 storage sheds and the company office building still stood on the edge of Bedford Street. The eighteen kilns were gone and the crushing and grinding building was being demolished for scrap. Many of the company houses, including those in Little Africa and Shanty Row, had been torn down years earlier when houses finally seemed an irrelevant and inefficient hindrance rather than a contributing component of plant operations. A number of the company's double houses and those along Bedford, Spruce and Greene streets were sold to residents. They and others built by local contractors to house workers at the new brickyard make up much of the fabric of Claysburg and will remain long after evidence of the brickyard has been erased.

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<sup>23</sup>Molly Gilmore, "Ex-union Chief: Employees Treated Unfairly," Altoona Mirror (July 31, 1988).

<sup>24</sup>Patricia S. Frank, "Claysburg May Get Truck Depot," Altoona Mirror (December 2, 1987).

APPENDIX



Map of Claysburg showing growth of the town after construction of the brickyard. Drawn by Isabel Yang.

Reproduced from Wallace, Kim E., Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania 1993 (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service).